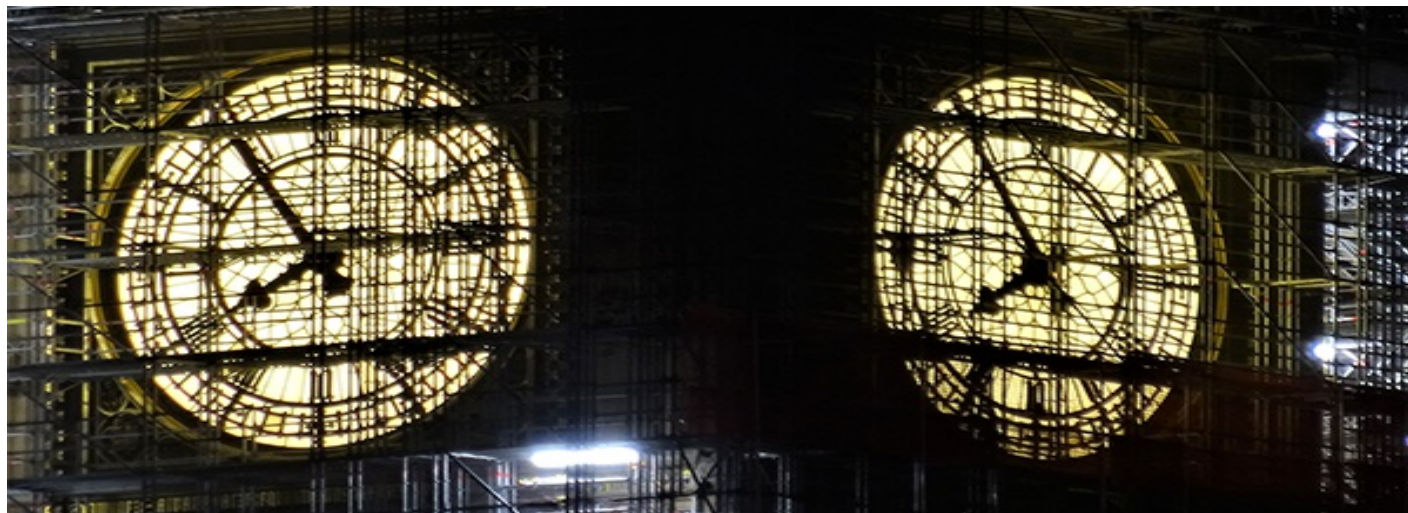


The UK's democracy is in danger of backsliding – but current policy proposals are not the right fix

Jessica Garland from the Electoral Reform Society responds to our recent publication, [The UK's Changing Democracy](#), and highlights crucial areas for immediate reform, particularly in the areas of political finance and online advertising.



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The [2018 Democratic Audit](#) is, as always, both a fascinating investigation into the workings of our democratic system, and a wake-up call: a reminder that our democracy is imperfect, fragile and threatened. The report also provides a very timely reminder that the problems facing our democracy are not inevitable. True, like many other democracies, the UK faces a new range of challenges, but it is also clear that current democratic problems are exaggerated by a crumbling, centralised political system that no longer works for modern Britain.

By taking a system approach, looking at the state as a 'multi-system' of many connected parts, the Audit gives us a better idea of how things can, and should, be improved. This approach shows us how the macro- and [micro-institutions](#) (those small-scale rules and regulations, or practices) are related, and how they impact on each other and on the political system as a whole. This system approach highlights, for instance, how the issues of political campaigning and campaign funding affect not just party competition but also electoral integrity, issues of political lobbying and electoral participation.

Seeing the diverse range of threats and opportunities posed by developments in online campaigning in this way explains why our current regulatory bodies are struggling to find solutions that address this complex web. The threats raised by misinformation and foreign interference in our elections are developments that cross between electoral rules, advertising rules and even state security. Yet any solution also has implications for electoral participation. Understanding the breadth of the problem creates a path to resolving it.

It is clear, for instance, that the issue of regulating online advertising must also consider the role of money in politics more broadly. And yet, whilst there is some momentum behind reforming campaign regulation, the latter issue has fallen by the wayside without the political will to address it.

In a similar vein, the chapter on electoral integrity demonstrates how single, one-off policy fixes, such as the recent trials of an ID requirement at polling stations, conveniently overlook the wider and more deeply rooted issues within the electoral system. The threats to electoral integrity, identified by this year's report, range from incomplete electoral registers, 'an archaic, antiquated and illogical system for determining who is allowed to vote' and lack of citizenship education, to a lack of spending restrictions at the national level and problems of online campaign regulation.

And yet it is voter ID and the franchise of overseas electors that the government has found time to address – policy changes that, as the Audit recognises, ‘do not speak in any way to the heart of the core electoral integrity challenges faced in the UK and to some extent worsen them.’

Of course, some of the peculiarities of the British political tradition are not new and have featured in many an Audit. The House of Lords remains a wholly unelected chamber with 92 hereditary peers (‘a self-perpetuating oligarchy’) and reserved seats for bishops. The report reminds us that only the polities of Tonga and the Kingdom of Lesotho include hereditary members of the aristocracy in the legislature, and the only other state to include representatives of the state religion is Iran. The House of Lords remains an institution that lacks ‘all democratic accountability and legitimacy’, a situation which gives it top marks on the problems/threats score.

Westminster’s electoral system also continues to feature as a significant problem, creating electoral deserts for major parties and large deviations from proportionality (the 2017 general election aside). If it hasn’t been already sufficiently discredited, the idea that the UK can rest on a superiority complex – as the home of the ‘Mother of Parliaments’ – has been well and truly put to bed by this latest Audit.

The report is a timely reminder of the need to press forward with reforms (be they macro or micro) because our democracy is in danger of backsliding. Whilst during the previous 20 years since the Audit began there has been overall improvement in the quality of democratic life in the UK, this year’s report finds ‘unprecedented declines in the core institutions of the UK’s democratic system’.

There are new threats and a new more challenging democratic context, but, as the report suggests, ‘we should not tolerate persistent small defects that corrode overall democratic quality’. The introduction of a *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats* (SWOT) analysis in this year’s Audit is a welcome addition, recognising that there are opportunities for change and providing a clear picture of where those opportunities lie.

Our political landscape is changing rapidly and will continue to do so as the Brexit process unfolds. There is both huge opportunity and risk in these changes. The ‘[Europeanisation](#)’ of political life we have experienced over the last two decades – with the introduction of devolved governments and proportional systems – could very easily change direction. The Westminster system, with its focus on strong government, elite control and centralising tendencies, casts a long shadow.

What is clear is that we absolutely must respond to the challenge this report sets, by resisting and actively challenging the defects, large or small, which corrode the quality of democratic life in the UK.

This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of Democratic Audit.

About the author

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